

STUDENTS' ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

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Abstract: Assertive communication has become a popular topic in nowadays organizations. Communication among employees is a key factor in the organization's operation. The information must flow from one person to the other, but the way we communicate with each other influences the quality of the given data. Why can assertiveness be important in the organizations? As almost all the companies work for gaining profit by their output (product or service), the organizations depend on the customers. It means that employees should communicate in a proper way to maintain clients. Moreover, communication style has an impact on the connection between the leader and the subordinates which means that managers also should know the way to be assertive. We can see that appropriate communication influences the effectiveness of the organizations in many fields. In my study, I used Rathus Assertiveness Schedule to research the assertiveness of the pupils at the University of Debrecen. My aim is to have an overview about the assertive behaviour of the students who will be new employees in a few years. 178 students participated in this research by filling a 30-item questionnaire and demographic questions. To analyse the answers, I used averages and standard deviations. The total achievable score in this test was between -90 and +90 and the answers were between -60 and 74 scores. Based on the results, men tend to be more assertive than women. 81 students of the total 178 are considered to be assertive. Among the male participants 29 people, while among the female students 52 people are assertive. "I strive to get ahead as well as most people in my position."; "There are times when I look for a good, vigorous argument." and "I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers." are the situations when they are most likely to behave assertively.

Keywords: assertiveness; assertive behaviour; students

JEL Classification: D83; I23; M59

1. Introduction

People communicate with each other every day, in almost every situation. Speaking is an ability that makes us a human being, so we should take care about our way of speaking. People normally like experiencing kind manner and words from others. When we express ourselves in a polite and proper way, it is called assertive communication (Bolton, 1987). It helps us to share our ideas and thought in a proper way. In the organizations assertive communication plays a key role. Leader want to maintain the best workforce and companies want to keep the customers. To achieve

this, employees should treat customers in a polite way, and leaders should learn to behave assertively with employees and vice versa. I think that leaders in the organizations may show an example how we should communicate with each other. As a lot of abilities are attainable, we can learn how to be assertive.

In the following, firstly I will give an overview of assertive communication and the way how to be assertive. In addition to this, I will list some methods that can help us to measure assertiveness. Secondly, I introduce my quantitative research which is based on the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule.

2. Theoretical Background

The research of Gergely et al. (2017) made in a sample of students shows that one of the background factors necessary for outstanding performance is the good communication skill. While as a general expectation this factor got an outstanding value, the students underestimated themselves in this field.

Why should students develop themselves in this field? Because according to the managers interviewed, the most important feature of verbal communication is that the employee has excellent speaking skills, and proper speech comprehension is also essential (Juhász, 2016). I think that learning assertive communication skills could help employees to reach higher performances.

Assertiveness does not have a universal definition. Different authors define it in many ways. In the following, I will collect some approaches to being assertive.

Ames (2009:112) said that “assertiveness is a characterization of how a person responds in a situation in which his/her positions and/or interests are, or could be, in conflict with others’ positions or interests.” He defines assertiveness as a reaction to different situations.

Lazarus (1973:697) divided assertive behaviour into four specific response patterns:

- the ability to say "no";
- the ability to ask for favours or to make requests;
- the ability to express positive and negative feelings;
- the ability to initiate, continue, and terminate general conversations.

According to Lazarus (1973) those people who have incapacities in one or more of the above-mentioned areas are incomplete in assertive communication.

Bolton (1987) determines assertiveness on the scale between aggression and submissiveness. Those who behave submissively neglect their own needs and rights. These people do not want to express their feelings, needs, values and problems. They use non-verbal features like the lack of eye contact, soft voice and hesitant speech. An aggressive person expresses his or her emotions, needs while hurting others. He or she always wants to win the arguments. This person can speak loudly and be rude and sarcastic. Assertiveness is somewhere in the middle of these two behaviour patterns. “An assertive person uses communication techniques that allow him to maintain his self-esteem, to seek happiness, and at the same time meet the needs, while protecting the rights and intimacy without exploiting or dominating other people (Bolton, 1987:87).” The most noticeable thing about assertive people is that they like themselves and live a happy life. But being assertive also implies that they will be vulnerable in the most important relationships.

Hadfield and Hasson (2010) describe assertive behaviour as a person who can tell others what he or she wants and what he or she does not want. They accept criticism and can decide whether or not to tell the others what they think. He or she has enough confidence and does not blame others if things go wrong. An assertive person does not want to prove to others but expects the proper treatment. An aggressive person is self-centred, often sarcastic and phlegmatic, while passive person is submissive, shy and sometimes confused. Table 1 summarizes the features of the assertive, the aggressive and the passive behaviour.

Table 1.: Features of assertive, aggressive and passive people

	Assertive	Aggressive	Passive
Attitude	Flexible Open optimistic supporting attentive	Hostile Prejudiced narrow-minded threatening	Pessimist Shy Submissive nervous
Behaviour	Problem solver collaborator constructive	self-centred phlegmatic destructive	helpless confused purposeless
Voice inflection	Calm Honest	Sarcastic Abusive	quiet monotonous
Typical sentences	“everything is alright?” “What do you think about it?” Thank you	“It is your fault.” “Stop doing it.” “I forbid...” “Do it right away.”	Sorry “I do not know” “I don't mind.” “It depends on you.”
Body language	open gestures and smile	hard-shell does not respect other people's intimate space	Stoop Twiddle with sg

Source: Hasson and Hadfield (2010)

As we can understand for now, assertiveness is not the only way how we can respond to the different circumstances. Candice et al. (1994) characterized two main dimensions of Socio-Communicative Style: assertiveness and responsiveness. Assertive people are independent, dominant, aggressive, competitive, and forceful, in contrast, responsive people are helpful, sympathetic, sincere, and kind to others. Tóth-Márhoffer and Paksi (2011) characterized responsive communication skills, as being able to hear the problems of others, giving feedback to help self-reflection, and having developmental and supportive intentions.

Some authors approach assertiveness as a right that everybody has. Aguilar-Morales and Vargas-Mendoza (2010) list some rights, that contain assertiveness. They listed some examples:

- to have the right to have his or her opinions and convictions,
- to have the right to try a change,
- to have the right to make mistakes,
- to have the right to ask for help or emotional support
- to have the right not to justify himself or herself to others,
- to have the right to say "no."

As it was mentioned before, Lazarus (1973) also described assertive people as those who could say “no”.

In Table 2 we can see that there are many different methods to measure assertiveness. The Lazarus Assertiveness Scale served as a basic for many further researches. One of the first issues is the 30-item Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) which includes 17 reversed items. The Assertion Inventory examines different situations by two dimensions: degree of discomfort and response probability. The College Self Expression Scale contains 50 items which were modified from the previous work of Lazarus (1971), Wolpe (1969), and Wolpe and Lazarus (1966). The Personal Relations Inventory measure four types of assertiveness: social assertiveness, independence, directive and defense of rights. The Scale for Interpersonal Behaviour has 50 items, 46 of which are classified into the four categories of assertive responding. The Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales consist of 19 scenarios that depict everyday interpersonal situations in which one might assert oneself.

Table 2: Assertiveness measurements

Year	Instrument	Authors	Features
1971	Lazarus Assertive Questionnaire	Lazarus (in Andrasik et al.)	20 items
1973	Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS)	Rathus	30 items
1974	College Self Expression Scale	Galassi et al.	50 items
1975	Assertion Inventory	Gambrill and Richey	40 items
1980	Personal Relations Inventory	Lorr, More and Mansueto	80 items
1984	Scale for Interpersonal Behaviour (SIB)	Arrindell, De Groot and Walburg	50 items
2011	Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales (AAA-S)	Thompson and Berenbaum	19 scenarios

Source: my own collection based on Rathus, 1973; Galassi et al., 1974; Gambrill and Richey, 1975; Lorr et al., 1980; Andrasik et al., 1981; Arrindell et al., 1984; Thompson and Berenbaum, 2011

3. Methodology

In my research I used the RAS questionnaire from the collection I showed before, because it is brief (30-item), practical and shows real-life situations. As I do this research among Hungarian students, I used the Hungarian version of the schedule which was used by other Hungarian authors (Erdősi, 2010; Vécseyné Kovách, 2014). The students filled the questionnaire according to their previous experiences. (i.e. “I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers”). The questionnaires were filled online and anonymously. I asked the participants to mark every item on a 6-grade Likert scale ranging from -3 to +3. The values of the scale that I used for analysing the answers were:

- -3: very uncharacteristic of me, extremely nondescriptive,
- -2: rather uncharacteristic of me, quite nondescriptive,

- -1: somewhat uncharacteristic of me, slightly nondescriptive,
- 1: somewhat characteristic of me, slightly descriptive,
- 2: rather characteristic of me, quite descriptive,
- 3: very characteristic of me, extremely descriptive.

Students who achieved higher scores reflected greater assertiveness.

The questionnaires were completed in March 2020 by pupils at University of Debrecen. The total number of the sample is 178, of which 50 were from men (28.1%) and 128 from women (71.9%). The age of the pupils ranged from 18 to 35. The average age of the participants was 21.7 years. According to the deviation of the faculties the majority of student studied at the Faculty of Humanities (23.6%) and the Faculty of Economics and Business (26.4%), the other 12 faculties (i.e Faculty of Law, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Health etc.) represented the other 50% of the answers. The students attended the following courses: undergraduate students (73%), master students (10.1%), students at an undivided training, which offers a master's degree (14.6%) and PhD students (2.3%).

4. Results

The total achievable score in the test was between -90 and +90 and the higher the value, the greater the assertiveness. Those students who receive below +10 score are shy or non-assertive and those with a score above +10 are assertive. In my questionnaire the answers were between -60 and 74 scores. The mean score was 7.51 and the standard deviation was 25.17. The mean score of the male responders was 12.78 and 21.55 was the value of standard deviation, while the mean score of the female responders was 5.45 and 26.24 was the value of standard deviation. Regarding the courses: the mean score of the undergraduate students was 6.74 (St.D.: 25.7), the mean score of the master students was 6.18 (St.D.: 36.4), the mean score of the students at an undivided training was -1.52 (St.D.: 23.6) and the mean score of the PhD students was 11.33 (St.D.:20.84).

Table 3: Assertiveness among students grouped by sex

Assertiveness	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Assertive	29	58%	52	40.6%	81	45.5%
Non-assertive	21	42%	76	59.4%	97	54.5%

Source: own research

81 students (45.5%) of the total 178 received below 10 scores, so these students are considered to be assertive. Table 3 shows the assertiveness and non-assertiveness among students. Among the male participants 29 of 50 people (58%) earned more than 10 points, while among the female students this rate is 52 of 128 people (40.63%). The score earned by most of the students was 9 (by 8 people), which is interesting because of the fact the minimum 10 points are necessary to be assertive.

Regarding the statements, I list some of them with higher assertiveness. I show those statements which earned more positive scores from the participants, because it means that in those situations the students mostly behave assertively (Erdösi,

2010). In Table 4 the first member of each percentage pair next to each statement is the "rather assertive" and the second member is the "rather non-assertive" opinion.

Table 4: Results with high assertiveness

No.	Statement	"rather assertive"	"rather non-assertive"
5.	If a salesperson has gone to considerable trouble to show me merchandise that is not quite suitable, I have a difficult time saying "No".	70.22%	29.78%
6.	When I am asked to do something, I insist upon knowing why	83.15%	16.85%
7.	There are times when I look for a good, vigorous argument.	87.08%	12.92%
8.	I strive to get ahead as well as most people in my position.	91.57%	8.43%
10.	I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers.	84.83%	15.17%
14.	I find it embarrassing to return merchandise.	65.17%	34.83%
17.	During an argument, I am sometimes afraid that I will get so upset that I will shake all over.	69.10%	30.90%
21.	I am open and frank about my feelings.	80.34%	19.66%
22.	If someone has been spreading false and bad stories about me, I see him or her as soon as possible and "have a talk" about it.	82.02%	17.98%
27.	If a couple near me in a theatre or at a lecture were conversing rather loudly, I would ask them to be quiet or to take their conversation elsewhere.	64.61%	35.39%
28.	Anyone attempting to push ahead of me in a line is in for a good battle	70.79%	29.21%
29.	I am quick to express an opinion.	73.60%	26.40%

Source: own research

I list those statements which earned outstanding results at the rather assertive opinion. The situation in which most of the students behave assertively is the "I strive to get ahead as well as most people in my position". More than 9 of 10 students want to progress in the organizational hierarchy. "There are times when I look for a good, vigorous argument" reflects that they would like to express themselves convincingly. This statement got 87.08% rather assertive rate. "I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers" means that students are open to make conversations with others (84.83%). "When I am asked to do something, I insist upon knowing why" expresses that most of the students (83.15%) would like to know the reason for their actions. The less assertive response which is not shown in Table 4

is “I complain about poor service in a restaurant and elsewhere”. It may mean that these students stand for themselves and they are not afraid to express their opinion.

5. In conclusion

In my research firstly I gave an overview of assertive communication and listed some ways how to be assertive in comparison with being aggressive or passive. Secondly, I used the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule to examine the students' communication skills at the University of Debrecen. The results are not representative, but I tried to reach students at different faculties. 45,5% of the students are assertive and the results show that men might behave more assertively than women in the given situations. The standard deviations were relatively high, which means that the students are thinking in many ways. In the future, I would like to research more on this topic, to find other interesting results.

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